

Letter from Alexander Graham Bell to Eliza Symonds Bell, November 10, 1892, with transcript

Letter written by Alexander Graham Bell to his mother, Mrs. Alexander Melville Bell, November 10, 1892, Beinn Bhreagh, Nova Scotia Beinn Bhreagh, Cape Bretton, N. S., November 10th, 1892 Dear Mama:

I think you and Papa would like to read my paper "Upon the Classification of Methods of Instructing the Deaf" which I read in Colorado before the Principals Conference — and so I have asked Mr. McCurdy to send you my copy as revised for the printer. You may keep it as I have a clean type-written copy here. Perhaps Mr. Hubbard would like to look over it too. This paper provoked prolonged discussion and at last a Committee was appointed (of which I am a member) to consider and discuss the whole subject of Classification and report to the profession through the columns of the Annals. If three-fourths of the schools of the country accept our Report — the classification recommended will be adopted in the Annals. The Committee consists of Prof. E. A. Fay, Chairman; Dr. Noyes of Minnesota and myself.

We have commenced a discussion of the subject by correspondence.

Prof. Fay wrote a note to me (a copy of which was forwarded to Dr. Noyes) containing his objections to my proposed classification.

I have replied to Prof. Fay and have sent a copy of my reply to Dr. Noyes in Minnesota. The next letter will be a communication from Dr. Noyes to Prof. Fay as chairman (a copy of which will be sent to me) in which Dr. Noyes will state his views. Then it will be Prof. Fay's turn again, etc., etc.

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I am sure you and Papa would follow the discussion with interest — so I will ask Mr. McCurdy to send you copies of all the letter that pass.

Mabel, Aileen and Elsie have just returned from Baddeck where they have been attending a meeting of the Young Ladies' Club. Aileen read a paper upon “Beethoven,” and Elsie made her debut as an authoress by reading an original paper “On the Sovereigns of Austria during the time of Beethoven.”

She has been hard at work upon the subject for several days past — hunting up items in Encyclopedias and other books. She has really written a very creditable paper and I feel quite proud of her. I will ask her to send a copy to you. Elsie improves from day to day and is now practically quite well. Both Elsie and Daisy are busy and happy all the time — Aileen makes an admirable teacher. They both like her — and she has the faculty of managing them in a way no teacher has done before her. Before this they have generally seemed to manage the teacher! They are making visible progress in their studies and also getting a great deal of out-door exercise. Elsie thinks nothing now of walking up the mountain — a thing she could not have done safely two or three months ago. Nervous twitchings have almost entirely disappeared, and she can control herself now so as to be perfectly still for a long time. I was especially struck by the improvement a short time ago when a Mr. Howells dined with us here. He sat next Elsie and paid her a great deal of attention. His wife sat next to me. I really felt quite proud of 2 Elsie that evening. She sat very quietly and sedately and talked to Mr. Howells quite like a grown up lady. She no longer talks like a sick nurse as she did for a long time after Miss Kirwan left her. Altogether her mind has assumed a more healthful and natural tone. She plays skip-rope with Daisy and Bertha Ellis, and takes part in spectacular Tableux and shows more enjoyment of childish sports than she used to do and yet at the same time she reads a great deal of good reading matter. She really seems to know a good deal of history — and is developing an ear for music. She cannot play as well as Daisy does, but she

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improves from day to day. I specially note an improvement in her voice — and think she will ultimately become a good singer.

I used to be very much disappointed that my children showed so little aptitude for music, but time has mended all that. Elsie has developed a good ear and great fondness for music, while Daisy, though not showing much ear as yet, has become a really good player. Under Aileen's instruction her touch has improved and she has learned to play with expression; and under my instruction she has learned to play at sight in a way few children of her age could do. She is fond of music and devotes a great deal of time to practising. Her voice is not good — and her attempts to sing betray decided lack of ear — but I have no doubt she will improve in this respect as Elsie has done. I do not encourage her to sing just now — as she has arrived at an age when great care, I think, should be taken not to exercise the vocal chords much. I presume her voice is changing at the present time and this probably accounts for its peculiar quality. I therefore prevent her from singing, excepting occasionally and prefer to wait for the establishment of the woman's voice before giving her instruction in singing.

Nearly every evening Elsie sings while Daisy plays her accompaniment. Daisy is developing very rapidly into a woman — and her conversation often startles me with its grown up air. Both she and Elsie are insatiable readers and what they read is good. Daisy's memory for language is really remarkable — I must speak to Aileen about training it. She learns poetry with the greatest ease, and can repeat it from memory after very few repetitions. I think therefore it would be a good plan to store her mind with choice selections — systemically — instead of leaving her really remarkable ability in this direction — practically untrained. The contrast between the two children in this respect is very striking. Elsie has great difficulty in committing to memory the exact words of any composition. She retains the ideas — but the language slips from her. Daisy on the other hand absorbs the exact language as well as the ideas and her memory retains the words without apparent effort. Both the children have strong individualities of their own — and Daisy especially I think is going to develop into a self-reliant and beautiful woman —

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beautiful, I mean, in character and disposition — rather than in person — although for that matter — neither of my children, I think, will be found lacking in physical beauty.

Daisy however is developing such a sweet helpful disposition that she is a great comfort to her mother and to me. The bud is expanding into a beautiful rose of which we will all be proud. Until within the last two or three years she was of rather a fretful disposition — her voice assuming habitually quite a querulous tone. The habit of “whining” so grew upon her that at last Mabel and I determined to speak seriously to her upon the subject and urge her to conquer the 3 habit while she was still young — for if she did not succeed in doing so then — it might remain with her through life.

Daisy took the matter to heart and tried so earnestly that from that day to this we have not heard a single “whine.” On the contrary she has developed a bright and sunny disposition — and as a matter of principle always tries to take a cheerful view of things.

She “carries her ain sunshine wi' her” wherever she goes and the house is dark when she goes out.

Her cheerfulness is infectious and she does not hesitate to compel a cheerful demeanour in others when occasion requires — by repeating the injunctions that were given to her so long ago. It is now “Papa don't whine”! “Why don't you look cheerful as you told me to do.” etc. Elsie too has become a perfect echo! I find that all the nice little principles I have tried to instil into her mind are flung back against me! — so I find it necessary to try at least to exemplify what I preach.

What delights me most in watching the development of Daisy's character is her unselfishness — and her thoughtfulness to others.

It is really touching to note her devotion to her mother. Her heart spontaneously moves her to help Mabel at every turn. In a hundred little ways she tries to be of use — and yet all the time is delightfully unconscious of the fact. She has already become her mother's

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right hand; and she is developing such a spirit of self-reliance that I have no doubt she will run the household by and bye — Papa and Mama and all! She quite runs Elsie already! It is really amusing to see how Elsie leans upon her younger sister for everything — and quietly submits to be “bossed” without even knowing of the fact. Daisy, already quite fills the part of oldest daughter in the household and Elsie seems contented to occupy a secondary place. She lacks self-reliance and the spirit to help others — but she is improving all the time.

She does many little things for others especially for me — but she does them consciously — and not unconsciously as Daisy does. They are artificial acts — acts of will — and not spontaneous acts of the heart — springing from a natural desire to be of use. Her natural inclination is to be helped — and not to help others herself. I note a change however — in the right direction — going on slowly all the time. Voluntary acts — like walking — after a time become habitual, and are performed unconsciously — so let us hope it may be with Elsie. Indeed I am sure the spirit will develop in time — for no one has a more loving or tender heart than Elsie — or a greater desire to do right. The difference between the two children is specially marked in their attitude towards their mother. Daisy flies to Mabel's help a hundred times a day and is utterly unconscious all the time that she is of any use. Elsie, on the other hand, rarely volunteers assistance — not — I think — from any disinclination — for I am sure she wants to help her mother — but simple from inability to perceive — without suggestion from others — the fact that she could have been of use — until too late to be of service.

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For example — at the dinner table or elsewhere — Daisy keeps Mabel fully posted as to what is being said by others — but Elsie rarely thinks of doing this. Of course she would do it — if she thought of it — but Daisy — without thinking about the matter at all — naturally does it — from a spontaneous impulse — and a spirit of thoughtfulness for her mother. I am pleased however to note a constant improvement in Elsie in this and other respects.

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Her mental attitude towards others has been a source of great anxiety to me for a long time. Her mind was in a morbid and unhealthy condition. This showed itself in querulousness, and a readiness to believe evil of others. She seemed at one time naturally to look upon the dark side of things and to take pleasure in criticising other people and telling tales of them to their discredit. Indeed the unworthy motives she was constantly attributing to other people led me very seriously to fear for herself — for people generally attribute to others motives like those that actuate themselves. Her ideas regarding other people were often of such a morbid and unnatural character — as to occasion me great anxiety and I therefore determined that she should spend this year as much as possible at home — so that we might influence her for good. She has improved so much that a great load has been lifted off my heart.

She has strongly implanted in her the desire to do right — and she fearlessly speaks the truth — even under circumstances of difficulty. She is happier and more cheerful than she has been for years — and has a much less tendency to speak evil of other people — or to think evil — which is still worse. She used to dream her time away — in a most enervating and unhealthful way. Now she is too busy with her school work to dream much. Her mind is in a much more healthy condition — and though she still has a tendency to “whine” (as Daisy puts it) and find fault with the beautiful world in which we live — the tendency is less marked than it was — and she is daily becoming more cheerful in disposition — and more generous in her estimate of others. Much of this change is due, I think to the influence of Daisy's bright and sunny ways — and to the companionship of Bertha Ellis — a sweet girl of her own age — or rather one year older.

Mabel calls — time has flown — morning is near. Good night.

Your loving son, Alec.